

Hiring Qualified Sign Language Interpreters

Prior to reading this information, it is recommended to read *Sign Language Interpreters: An Introduction*: www.nationaldeafcenter.org/hiringsli.

Overview

No discussion regarding hiring qualified interpreters is complete without an understanding of the definition of “qualified,” as it pertains to the American with Disabilities Act (ADA), state regulation, and the concept of “effective communication.”

What are the minimum qualifications to be an interpreter?

The ADA states that a qualified interpreter is one who...” via a video remote interpreting (VRI) service or an on-site appearance is able to interpret effectively, accurately, and impartially, both receptively and expressively, using any necessary specialized vocabulary.”¹ What is “effective” is determined by the deaf individual. ADA does not mandate certification; however, it is a strong benchmark for determining qualification. Interpreters may also be government regulated.

Interpreter regulation is state-specific. Some states require certification in order to work, others require state licensure, and in some states there is no regulation at all. Some states also require certification to work in particular settings, such as the legal setting or in the K-12 system.

What is interpreter certification?

There are two primary certification bodies in the United States today. They are: 1) Registry of Interpreters for the Deaf (RID), which administers a number of generalist and specialty certificates; and 2) Boys Town National Research Hospital, which administers the Educational Interpreter Performance Assessment (EIPA), a test specific to K-12 settings. Current RID certification requires a bachelor’s degree (any major) or an approved Alternative Pathway to Eligibility application. Certified Deaf Interpreters meet a different set of certification requirements. The EIPA does not have these types of prerequisites.

Who is responsible to arrange for and pay interpreters?

The ADA is clear in that schools, institutions, businesses, and employers are responsible for arranging and paying for interpreters. Conversely, the deaf individual is not responsible for arranging or paying for this service.

What do I need to know in order to hire the right interpreter?

- The length of the assignment: If it is over an hour, it may be necessary to use a team of interpreters.
- The nature of the assignment: is it a lecture, small group discussion, a counseling session, one-on-conversation, job interview, sporting event, etc.?
- The parties involved: How many people will be involved in the communication, and do they

represent more than one spoken language (i.e., English and Spanish)? Will more than one deaf individual be involved in the communication?

- The preferred communication mode of the deaf individual: Is it ASL interpretation, transliteration, oral interpretation, etc.?

Whenever possible, consult with the person who is making the request. In fact, the ADA mandates that institutions give “primary consideration to the individual’s choice” regarding communication access. It is important to note that this aspect of the ADA refers to their choice of a specific accommodation (e.g., interpreting vs. live captioning) or mode of interpreting (ASL interpreting vs transliteration), rather than a specific interpreter or other service provider.

Institutions and agencies often use in- house screening tools to determine the skill level of potential interpreters. Some use it in lieu of certification, but many others use it as a supplement to certification.

How do I find a qualified interpreter?

Qualified sign language interpreters can be hired through an agency or directly as a staff member or independent contractor. Individuals seeking to hire an independent contractor often start by accessing the RID’s Directory of Certified Interpreters. Others contact their local deaf advocacy agency to obtain an interpreter should they have an in-house referral program, or to a seek referral to an outside qualified interpreter referral agency.

When hiring an independent contractor, make sure to determine the extent of the fees. Some interpreters will charge portal to portal, meaning the me it takes from one assignment to another. Some will request a minimum hourly rate. Almost all interpreters charge a two-hour minimum.

Not all referral agencies are the same! In the field of interpreting it sometimes feels like there are more interpreter referral agencies than there are interpreters. Many are small “mom and pop” shops, while others are large spoken language-based operations that do not have visual interpreting expertise. Many do not screen their interpreters. Always seek a referral from someone you trust and who knows this specialized field.

Additional Resources

- National Consortium of Interpreter Education Centers (NCIEC): www.interpretereducation.org
- Registry of Interpreters for the Deaf (RID): www.rid.org
- RID’s Standard Practice Paper on Team Interpreting: www.tinyurl.com/teaminterpretingSPP

Additional resources on this subject may be available at www.NationalDeafCenter.org.

Reference

- ¹ American with Disabilities Act Title III Regulations: Part 36 Nondiscrimination on the Basis of Disability in Public Accommodations and Commercial Facilities.” Information and Technical Assistance on the Americans with Disabilities Act. US Department of Justice Civil Rights Division, 15 Sept. 2010. Web. www.tinyurl.com/2010ADAStandards

